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ACCOUNTING FOR ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION A Discursive Study Among Minority and Majority Group Members

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This article discusses the ways in which ethnic minority and majority group members account, in an interview context, for the existence of discrimination in Dutch society. Taking a discursive approach, the focus is on the strategies used to describe and explain discrimination. In both groups, certain members were found to use discursive strategies questioning the omnipresence of discrimination and problematizing its causes, whereas others employed devices that made discrimination appear factual, with the Dutch as its main agents. The use of these strategies was examined in relation to subject positions that the participants took up throughout the interview. It is concluded that the discursive strategies used can be understood in relation to the way speakers position themselves within particular discourses. Hence, similar discursive strategies function in different ways in different contexts, and both mainstream and discourse analytical studies on discrimination should not start from a simple majority-minority dichotomy.

Keywords: *discrimination; ethnicity; positioning; accounts*

Discrimination and racism are pervasive and highly problematic phenomena. They exist on the institutional and structural levels of society, they are communicated through the media and by politicians, and they are a feature of many everyday situations. In psychology, discrimination is predominantly examined in terms of intergroup differentiation and in terms of minority group members' perception of discrimination. Many studies have focused on the differential evaluation of, and behavior toward, in-group and out-group members (see Brewer & Brown, 1998; Duckitt, 1994, for reviews). There is also an increasing number of studies on the perceptions of and reactions to discrimination

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(see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002, for reviews).

Although there are many differences between these studies, they are similar in their focus on cognitive and affective reactions and processes. Shelton (2000) notes that this emphasis on perception and evaluation is quite ironic because discrimination is fundamentally an interactive phenomenon. It is in social interactions that discrimination typically occurs. Furthermore, interpretations in terms of discrimination have social costs and consequences, such as being labeled oversensitive or prejudiced (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). In everyday life, issues of discrimination and racism involve blaming and accusations, making it a sensitive topic of debate. The seriousness and omnipresence of discrimination, the causes of discrimination, the responsibilities for discrimination, and the consequences of discrimination are all topics of debate (e.g., Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Verkuyten, 1997). Taking a discursive analytical stance (e.g., Billig, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Wetherell, 1998) makes it possible to examine how ethnic discrimination is presented and the ways that people account for discrimination. Discrimination in society is something people talk about, and it is the way in which it is talked about that performs a variety of social functions, with different social consequences.

It is particularly important to study this "accounting for discrimination" among both ethnic majority and minority group members. The role of group status differences has been emphasized in intergroup theories such as social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) theories. However, apart from their focus on cognitive and affective reactions, these theories tend to use a rather simple dualist majority-minority model that is not always adequate for understanding how discrimination is interpreted.

Such a model is, typically, also used in discourse analytical work on racism and prejudice. This line of research tends to examine racist discourse and discursive strategies against the background of a society in which ethnic minorities are excluded and discriminated against by the majority group (e.g., Augoustinos, LeCouteur, & Soylan, 2002; Essed, 1991; Rapley, 2001; Van Dijk, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Discursive acts and strategies are investigated in terms of the concerns of dominant group members and the analysis is used to make wider claims about the way these acts and strategies function to sustain and legitimate the position and interests of the dominant group. Such an analysis bases itself (implicitly) on a majority-minority distinction and thereby runs the danger of reproducing and reinforcing this group dualism.

A dualistic approach tends to ignore the diversity within majority and minority groups and neglects the possibility that members of both groups give similar explanations for discrimination. Recently, several studies have emphasized the presence of within-group diversity and

stressed the need to view ethnic majority and minority groups as heterogeneous categories (e.g., Celious & Oyserman, 2001). Majority members do not simply reproduce society's racism, and minority group members are not simply victims or passive recipients of discrimination but, rather, they are active agents trying to make sense of their social world (Oyserman & Swim, 2001; Shelton, 2000). Hence, it is important to examine the subject positions from which majority and minority group members can take up different stances on the issue of ethnic discrimination in society.

Positioning theory, as propounded by Davies and Harré (1990) and Van Langenhove and Harré (1994), proposes that when talking about social issues, people are involved in the discursive construction through which statements and actions are made intelligible and coherent. People actively employ discourses that provide particular possibilities and limitations for making claims and building accounts. As Burr (2002) has put it, "The concept of positioning recognizes both the power of culturally available discourses to frame our experience and constrain our behavior while allowing room for the person to actively engage with those discourses and employ them in social situations" (p. 113). Hence, similar to the work of other researchers (e.g., Abell & Stokoe, 2001; McVittie, McKinlay, & Widdicombe, 2003; Wetherell, 1998), positioning theory draws on elements of two approaches to discourse analysis that are commonly distinguished in social psychology. One emphasizes the action orientation of language and the accomplishments of speakers in talk (e.g., Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996), whereas the other focuses more on the socially available patterns of meaning in organizing accounts and formulating accusations and justifications (e.g., Augoustinos et al., 2002; Bekerman, 2002; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

Positioning theory locates subject positions within the wider discourses of social life (Edley, 2001; Törrönen, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Talk, therefore, reflects discourses and narrative forms that already exist in society. People draw on different discourses in the positioning of themselves and others by, for example, adopting a humanitarian or nationalist narrative or by referring to individualistic and protestant ethical values. These discourses can be expected to affect the way the existence of discrimination and racism is accounted for. For example, positioning oneself within a nationalist discourse raises the question of how discrimination against ethnic minorities in society can be accounted for. Furthermore, ethnic minorities may find talk about discrimination that defines them as victims difficult to reconcile with claims of personal responsibility and possibilities for social improvement.

This study focuses on the question of how, in the context of an interview, ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority group members living in the Netherlands address discrimination in Dutch society. The analytical

interest lies in mapping some of the ways that discrimination is accounted for and the discourses from which accounts are provided. The emphasis is on the discursive strategies used to construct different explanations for discrimination. The central argument is that these strategies can be understood as being (at least in part) shaped by the subject positions adopted throughout (parts of) the interviews. In the context of a conversation or interview, speakers typically develop a narrative that involves a relatively coherent and consistent position (e.g., Crossley, 2000; McAdams, 1993). These narratives inform the broad direction of the talk and the particular accounts provided. Hence, the present analysis is not on the details of the moment-to-moment, situational and flexible use and development of subject positions (e.g., Antaki, Condor, & Levine, 1996; Edwards, 1998) but mostly aligned with ideas developed in the more global forms of analysis characteristic of critical discursive psychology (e.g., Billig, 1999; Weltman & Billig, 2002; Wetherell, 1998). Here, the focus is on ethnic discrimination in society. In studying accounts, no formal definition of discrimination is offered and used, but priority is given to the participants' own understandings and interpretations.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

The corpus of material used for this study is derived from a relatively large-scale ongoing project on racism and the construction of national and ethnic identities. Part of this involved ethnographic fieldwork and focus group discussions (e.g., Verkuyten, 1997, 2001). In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted and it is upon these that the present analysis is based. Some of the interviews were conducted with a single participant, whereas in others there were up to 3 participants. In the latter case, the participants of each interview were family members, friends, or neighbors, and thus knew each other well. We used this kind of interview because we were interested in the participants' reactions toward each other and in their arguments, if any.

In total, there were 71 ethnically Dutch participants: 36 women and 25 men. Most of them have a middle-class background, and they ranged in age from 22 to 71 years of age. Most came from regions around the cities of Utrecht and Rotterdam, but some came from the eastern part of the country. In addition, there were 56 participants from different ethnic minority groups. Nine participants described their background as Turkish, 11 as Moroccan, 8 as Surinamese-Hindustani, and the remaining described themselves as Moluccan. These participants lived in Rotterdam and Utrecht, or in eastern and southern parts of the country. There were 31 women and 25 men aged 18 to 42. In general, the ethnic minority participants were somewhat

younger than the Dutch ones. All of them had lived in the Netherlands for at least 18 years. Furthermore, the ethnic minority participants came more often from lower-class backgrounds.

Participants were recruited from community centers in city neighborhoods and via snowball sampling from the acquaintances and friends of the initial participants. Although this leaves us somewhat open to the suggestion that our sample is too small and selective to merit any firm conclusions, our principle aim was not to prove the generality of the findings but to describe and analyze in detail some of the ways in which ethnic discrimination is described and interpreted. That is, our focus was on the way that discriminatory categories and constructions are accounted for in talk. These constructions may or may not be invoked to manage one's position *per se*. However, the question of intentions and reasons for the language used is beyond the scope of this study. As such, the research corresponds to other discourse approaches to the analysis of racism (e.g., Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Rapley, 2001; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

The participants were asked to participate in a study on "contemporary issues in Dutch society." It was made clear to the participants that we were conducting an independent study, and it was explained that we wanted to hear what people living in the Netherlands thought about contemporary topics. The interviews were designed to explore a range of different issues related to this, including social and political developments in Dutch society, national and ethnic identity, European unification, migration, integration, and discrimination. The topic of discrimination was introduced toward the end of the interview by using variants of a standard question about whether ethnic minorities are discriminated against in the Netherlands. This was followed by questions on the nature and causes of discrimination. These questions set the discursive environment and task for the participants.

The interviews were in Dutch and conducted by six ethnically Dutch interviewers, including the author. The interviewers did not explicitly elaborate their own views on discrimination. However, the context in which the responses were produced included participants' interpretations of what is considered appropriate language when talking about discrimination with an ethnically Dutch researcher. Similar to other studies (e.g., Baker, 1997; Condor, 2000; McVittie et al., 2003; Speer & Potter, 2000), the interviews were treated as conversations or interactions rather than as elicitations. Thus, a more interaction-based analytic stance toward the interviews was adopted in which the interviewee or interviewees and the interviewer were both considered responsible for any interaction, albeit from a different position.

Working on the premise that the type of analysis to be carried out should inform the choice of transcription notation (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), we chose to transcribe for basic content rather than taking the

considerably more detailed approach common in, for example, conversational analysis. Our reasoning was that this analysis focuses on the accounts used by the participants rather than on the fine-grained sequential organization of the material. Thus, details such as timing and intonation that would make the excerpts difficult to read have not been used. In addition, the inherent difficulty of translating the discussions adequately means that nuances are easily lost in translating this kind of talk. Hence, some Dutch terms are included, and the original Dutch text is available on request.

We began the analysis by building up a data file of all the sections related to discrimination that were generated in response to the questions of the interviewer. These sections were analyzed in terms of subject positions adopted and the related ways in which discrimination was presented and discussed. We focused our attention on the discursive strategies that were used to achieve and sustain specific accounts. Data extracts will be presented to discuss common general strategies.

Before presenting the analysis, a final reflective note on the use of the term *ethnicity* is in order. There are always a variety of analysts' categories available for contextualizing the data. In this article, a distinction has been made between ethnic Dutch and ethnic minorities. The main reason behind this is that to the participants, this distinction was central in their talk about themselves and others. This may have been due to the interview context and the questions asked, for example, on discrimination against ethnic minorities. However, it may also reflect the dominant ethnic discourse in the Netherlands where, for example, the term *race* is not heard very often (Essed, 1991). Many members of ethnic minorities are Dutch nationals, but in public debates the term *Dutch* is typically used in an ethnic sense. Furthermore, by using the term *ethnicity*, the Dutch are presented as one ethnic group among other ethnic groups. That is, as a group that claims an (imagined) common history and origin. Finally, when both the ethnic Dutch and the minority group participants talked about ethnic minority groups in general, they mostly used the terms *foreigner* and *allochtonous*. When participants were more specific, different ethnic group labels were used (e.g., *Turks*, *Surinamese*).

ANALYSIS

No explicit denial of discrimination against ethnic minority groups in Dutch society was made in any of the interviews. All participants agreed that discrimination occurs and all argued that this was unfortunate and unacceptable. This widespread acknowledgment of the existence of ethnic discrimination is in agreement with findings from other studies in the Netherlands (e.g., Verkuyten, 1997) and also the

United States (e.g., Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). However, there were some (subtle) differences in the way that discrimination was discussed, both within the “Dutch” group and the “ethnic minority” groups. The accounts provided focused on two issues: the existence of discrimination and the explanation for discriminatory behavior.

The responses on these issues were diverse, but many of them can be made sense of in terms of the subject positions adopted and developed in different parts of the interview. Obviously, the subject positions varied and were not always consistent throughout the same interview. Hence, no one homogeneous story emerged but, as I will try to show, parts of the talk were structured by positioning oneself within particular discourses, which had consequences for the way in which discrimination against ethnic minorities was described and explained.

MAKING DISCRIMINATION FACTUAL

THE ETHNIC DUTCH

One of the most important strategies for making a description or interpretation factual is to define it as having an obvious and indisputable “out-there-ness” (Potter, 1996). Such a definition makes an interpretation independent of the perspective, wishes, or concerns of the speaker. In response to the question of whether foreigners are discriminated against, some Dutch participants emphasized the reality of discrimination and the responsibility of the Dutch, as in the first two excerpts.

Excerpt 1

1. *Interviewer*: Do foreigners ever get discriminated against in the Netherlands?
2. *Dick*: Yeah, they certainly do.
3. *Tineke*: I know for sure, yeah.
4. *Dick*: They certainly do.

Excerpt 2

1. *Interviewer*: Do you think that foreigners ever get discriminated against in the Netherlands?
2. *Henny*: I don't *think* they do, I *know* they do.

In both excerpts, the participants do not hesitate to respond to the interviewer's direct question but give the normative “preferred” response of agreement (Pomerantz, 1984). These participants define the existence of discrimination as a reality that is beyond discussion. Dis-

crimination exists; that is the way things are. However, in doing so, they seem to attend to or orient toward the idea that discrimination is only a possibility and rather uncommon. This idea is indicated by the mere fact of asking the question and by the interviewer's use of the term "ever get." Both features suggest that discrimination is not an obvious and regular phenomenon. In Excerpt 1, the response to the factual and difficult-to-contradict question is a strong affirmative answer in which the reality of discrimination is emphasized by using modalizing terms (Pomerantz, 1986). In the second excerpt, the interviewer asks a more personal question, whether the participant thinks that discrimination exists. In her answer, Henny explicitly and with emphasis rejects the idea that her assessment can be discounted or undermined as an opinion that is not supported by reality. That discrimination exists is not something that she thinks might be the case but a thing that she definitely knows to be true.

Another example is in Excerpt 3, where Karel responds to the question of whether discrimination exists.

Excerpt 3

1. *Karel: Yaaaahhhh, too right* it does, see 'cos tolerance is on the decline and
2. nationalism is on the increase and that thing of "own people first" and, er, prejudice.
3. Oh definitely, er, quite apart from discrimination by neighbors who say you dirty
4. Turk, it's also done by like official bodies, like in jobs and on the labor market.

Again, there is a strong and emphasized affirmative answer in response to the question about the possibility of discrimination. Furthermore, the three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of neighborhood, official jobs, and labor market (line 4) constructs discrimination as common. The use of such listing is a device frequently used to convey the comprehensiveness of the speaker's understanding and of conveying events as general. In addition, the reality of discrimination is indicated by giving explanations for its existence rather than, for example, discussing explanations for perceptions and beliefs about discrimination. The explanation offered focuses on the declining tolerance and growing nationalism of the Dutch. Hence, the Dutch are made responsible for the existing discrimination.

These factual accounts of discrimination display a version of the practical reasoning and commonplace understanding of prejudice and racism. In contrast to a considerate and unbiased position, the prejudice of the Dutch is made responsible. On a broad level, the participants that emphasized the reality of discrimination tended to position

themselves in moral discourses of humanitarian and Christian ideals in which ideas of justice, care, and concern for others were emphasized. These discourses tended to structure questions of immigration and ethnic minorities. That is to say, the talk about foreigners was grounded in these discourses that provided the contrasting meanings and values within which the participants positioned themselves. They presented a framework for the description and explanation of ethnic discrimination in society. For example, earlier in the interview, when talking about social developments in Dutch society, Dick and Tinneke (from Extract 1) emphasized the importance of what they called Christian values, such as care and social justice. Furthermore, Henny (from Extract 2) labeled herself at the beginning of the interview as a humanitarian and argued that she always tried to be kind to “all human beings” and tried to help those that are less fortunate than herself. And throughout the interview, Karel (from Extract 3) took up the position that everyone should have equal opportunities and an equal say in how things are done. He emphasized the importance of this in relation to, for example, social problems, European unification, and issues of multiculturalism.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

Interestingly, in some of the interviews with ethnic minority members, the accounts of discrimination had similarities to those of the Dutch participants discussed. Similar claims were made, but these were related to a different subject position that was adopted. The next excerpt is taken from an interview with a Surinamese man, Lloyd.

Excerpt 4

1. *Interviewer*: Does discrimination occur?
2. *Lloyd*: Do you mean towards us?
3. *Interviewer*: Yes.
4. *Lloyd*: Of course, there most certainly is discrimination against us. It isn't
5. necessarily, er, a conscious thing. But if you are in a shop or a pub or suchlike, then
6. there's certain Dutch people that, er, be it consciously or not, avoid you in one way
7. or another. They'll look at you, in a discotheque or whatever, like, who's this guy.
8. You can feel, if you're in the streets and you meet somebody Dutch, they will look
9. down or avoid you. They act like they don't want to know.
10. *Interviewer*: So it happens a lot?
11. *Lloyd*: Yeah, sure thing, it really does, yeah. It happens all the time, also in school

12. and stuff. There's so much prejudice and racism among the Dutch, er, and that's
13. why they discriminate, without knowing.

In his response, Lloyd gives a clear assessment of both the existence and cause of discrimination. Similar to some of the Dutch participants, discrimination is described by him as a self-evident reality, or an obvious fact of life. It is something that certainly does happen often, and it is not restricted to particular spheres of life. Furthermore, in the last two lines discrimination is explicitly explained by referring to the negative attitudes of the Dutch. Because of their racism, ethnic minorities are discriminated against.

However, although the assessment is similar to that of some of the Dutch participants, it is fabricated in another way. Lloyd, in particular, adopts the position of an insider who is knowledgeable about discrimination against minorities. He begins by asking whether the interviewer means discrimination toward "us" (line 2 and line 4). Subsequently, the concrete and detailed examples and the modalizing terms (e.g., "all the time") help to make his claim factual (Edwards & Potter, 1992). They suggest a careful observation and a good understanding of discrimination and define discrimination as something that exists in actual fact, independent of his own concerns and preoccupations.

Claims about the existence of discrimination are often problematic and can be challenged by presenting ethnic minority group members as oversensitive and unjustly accusing majority members of racism (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). There is some evidence of Lloyd's orientation toward these possible rhetorical counters. For example, his question for clarification in line 2 suggests that he is not preoccupied with ethnic discrimination; he does not immediately interpret discrimination in ethnic terms. Furthermore, in lines 5, 6, and 13 he refers to the possible unconscious nature of discrimination by the Dutch. Mentioning the nonintentional nature of discrimination might, if read within the context of his being interviewed by an ethnically Dutch person, be understood as a strategy to soften his accusation of the Dutch.

Thus, in explaining discrimination Lloyd takes up the position of ethnic minority group members who are victims of discrimination. He positions himself within a discourse of victimization that locates minorities as victims of (nonintentional) Dutch racism. This is certainly not a one-off example. There are several participants that in parts of the interview took up the victim position and defined themselves as standing apart from Dutch culture and society. In doing so, they also emphasized their ethnic identity and stressed cultural characteristics as being self-defining that differed from those typically valued by the Dutch. Studies in other countries have come to a similar conclusion (e.g., Ogbu, 1993; Waters, 1994).

QUESTIONING DISCRIMINATION

THE ETHNIC DUTCH

In the interviews, different strategies were used to question the reality and causes of discrimination. In the following excerpts, 3 Dutch participants responded to the question of whether ethnic discrimination exists. The question was posed either in a factual (Excerpts 5 and 6) or an opinionated way (Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 5

1. *Interviewer*: Do foreigners ever get discriminated against in the Netherlands?
2. *Theo*: Oh, er, well, er, I guess so.
3. *Annie*: er, it probably happens.
4. *Theo*: I guess so, yeah.

Excerpt 6

1. *Interviewer*: Do foreigners ever get discriminated against in the Netherlands?
2. *Henk*: Oh, er, that's, see it's, er, it's, look I don't know. I know nothing of the sort.
3. I guess it happens now and again.

Excerpt 7

1. *Interviewer*: Do you think that foreigners ever get discriminated against?
2. *Mirjam*: Hm, er, that's a difficult one you know, er, I think that's a very difficult
3. question. When, er, when can you say, like, hey, I'm being discriminated against.
4. That's tricky. What is, er, discrimination exactly, how do you know? I guess it
5. happens sometimes, but, er, it was on telly the other day that foreigners feel
6. discriminated against *really* quickly in whatever way, when Dutch people get
7. really discriminated against by foreigners, too.

Although the questions are similar to those in Excerpts 1 and 2, the responses differ. For example, in Excerpts 5 and 6, there is again the factual question that is difficult to contradict and that invites agreement. However, here the answers are not straightforwardly affirmative. Rather, in the responses there are the pauses, hesitations, self-corrections, and false starts. These are typical of talk about difficult and sensitive topics (Condor, 2000; Van Dijk, 1984) and indicate that a

normative “dispreferred” response is being given (Pomerantz, 1984). To the Dutch, discrimination against ethnic minorities poses a potential difficulty for a Dutch self-image of tolerance and openness. These three excerpts are from Dutch participants who, throughout the interview, quite explicitly positioned themselves within a discourse of national identity, in a manner not dissimilar to positioning documented in other European countries (e.g., Condor, 2000; De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999). Within such a discourse, discrimination against ethnic minorities that reflects negatively on the Dutch raises interactional difficulties. Three ways of accounting for discrimination were identified in the interviews: (a) “accounting for not accounting,” (b) challenging or undermining the reality and seriousness of discrimination, and (c) explaining why discrimination exists.

Accounting for not accounting. One strategy is to make it acceptable that no account for the existence of discrimination is given. The invitation to speak about discrimination can occasion a reluctance or refusal to give an interpretation, thus helping the interviewee to avoid the normative issues involved. This can be done in various ways. For example, in Excerpt 6 Henk claims to lack knowledge about the subject matter, thus professing to being unable to say something on the issue. Another example can be found in Excerpt 7. Here, Mirjam defines the question as a very difficult one (line 2), implying that there is no simple or straightforward answer. The difficulty would rest in the imprecise nature of discrimination.

Seriousness and reality of discrimination. Another strategy to deal with discrimination is to challenge its obvious reality and seriousness. In the three excerpts above, and with some reluctance, the existence of discrimination is presented as a possibility. The participants argue that they *think* that discrimination exists and, in contrast to Excerpts 1 to 3, do not claim that they *know* that it exists. Here, the difference between thinking and knowing subtly helps to undermine the reality of discrimination. Discrimination is not denied but is presented as a possibility rather than as an actual and obvious fact. Furthermore, the phrase “I guess” (in Dutch *ik denk het wel* and *dat zal soms wel*) present in all three excerpts (respectively, line 2, line 3, and line 4) does some discursive work. Used in this context, it presents discrimination as a not-very-important or problematic issue. This is also indicated by the use of terms such as “now and again” and “sometimes.”

The reality and seriousness of discrimination can also be made problematic by presenting it as (partly) dependent on the feelings and views of the people concerned. In this way, the claim becomes less of a feature of the world and more like a personal assessment resulting from particular preoccupations and sensitivities. One strategy is to make a contrast between groups of people. Drawing contrasting

categorical distinctions is a useful means of accomplishing discursive goals (Dickerson, 2000; Edwards, 1997). In the last part of Excerpt 7 (lines 6 to 7), for example, Mirjam makes the distinction between foreigners and Dutch people. She claims that both face discrimination but emphasizes that foreigners are quick to feel discriminated against. The reference to the “telly” makes her claim externally provided for rather than a personal assessment. Another example of this line of reasoning is found in the next excerpt, in which Fred and Iris respond to the question whether foreigners are discriminated against.

Excerpt 8

1. *Fred*: Er, er, it probably does happen.
2. *Iris*: It probably happens, er, but I think that if you, er, are in a minority situation,
3. you often think that you are, er, discriminated against and that it often, er, really
4. isn't the case.
5. *Fred*: Whereas you're being treated, er, exactly the same and a Dutch person, well
6. they can hardly say I'm being discriminated against if they're like rejected.
7. Whereas it's like exactly the same for Dutch people.

In the first line and after some hesitation, Fred uses the phrase “probably does” (in Dutch *dat zal wel*), which again presents discrimination as a not-very-important or problematic issue. Then Iris takes over and introduces the contrast between appearance and reality: People in a minority position would often think that they are discriminated against when this is often not the case. Note that the generalized “you” and the minority position explanation make the idea of being discriminated understandable and common. In lines 5 to 7, Fred adds that foreigners and the Dutch are in similar situations, but that the latter are unable to get a definition in terms of discrimination accepted.

The contrast with the Dutch in Excerpts 7 and 8 does not only question the extent and seriousness of discrimination that ethnic minorities actually face but also does some identity work. On one hand, it works toward presenting minorities as inaccurate (Excerpt 8) and oversensitive (Excerpt 7). On the other, it defines the Dutch as more resilient and, in a way, as the real victims of the situation. After all, they are also confronted with discrimination but are unable to define it as such (see also line 13 in Excerpt 9).

Explaining discrimination. A third way of accounting for discrimination against foreigners identified from the interviews refers to the explanation of why discrimination exists. Presenting discrimination as a common and human phenomenon is one example. When discrimination is common and general, the implication is that it is not typical of

the Dutch to be perpetrators and that they bear no special responsibilities.

The next extract is from the interview with David, the participant who expressed the most negative views about ethnic minorities. In response to the interviewer's question, David argues that he knows for certain that foreigners are discriminated against (line 2). When asked for an explanation, he continues in line 4.

Excerpt 9

1. *Interviewer*: Do foreigners ever get discriminated against, do you think?
2. *David*: Sure, 'course they do.
3. *Interviewer*: Well, and why is that?
4. *David*: Er, well in the way I also get discriminated against, I think discrimination against
5. foreigners is, er, just as normal as me getting discriminated against,
6. 'cos if they tell me I can't have a job, where a woman is being
7. taken on first, I think that's madness, so if I'm being discriminated
8. against, why
9. shouldn't a foreigner get discriminated against? 'Cos let's be honest,
10. foreigners do it far more than we do. 'Cos Turks and Kurds,
11. er, yeah, and Turks and Moroccans. I think them Blacks discriminate
12. against each other
13. even more, yeah, and Antilleans and Surinamese, too. So I think it's
14. way over the
15. top, that they are allowed to discriminate against each other and that
16. if we do it
17. we get, er, punished right away or something like that. I think it's all
18. being blown out of
19. proportion, seeing that the Dutch in general, or Whites, discriminate
20. less bad
21. than the whole lot of 'em do among themselves.

In this excerpt, the discrimination against foreigners is normalized by using different discursive devices that present discrimination as a common and general phenomenon. In line 2, David responds with "Sure, of course" (in Dutch *natuurlijk*, which literally is "naturally"). This term works to present discrimination as an unsurprising or self-evident fact. Furthermore, in lines 4 to 8, David compares discrimination against ethnic minorities with positive gender discrimination that he disapproves of (it is labeled as "madness," in Dutch *krankzinnig*). In addition, in lines 9 to 11 and by giving various examples he claims that minority groups discriminate against each other. The suggestion seems to be that discrimination is omnipresent and, therefore, that it is not abnormal for foreigners to face discrimination, too.

In line 8, before presenting his claims about discrimination among minority groups, David starts with "'cos let's be honest" (in Dutch, *laten we eerlijk zijn*). The work done by this phrase is to contrast reality with a social taboo: that what he is about to say is something we all know to

be true but do not admit or are not allowed to say. The apparent truth is that compared to the Dutch, the discrimination between ethnic minority groups is much worse and is also not penalized. In other words, it is not typical of the Dutch to discriminate; in fact, the Dutch supposedly discriminate less and are punished more easily. Discrimination is a general phenomenon of which some groups are more guilty than others.

Several participants used a similar line of argument. They made it clear that discrimination occurs between all kinds of groups, including between ethnic minorities living in the Netherlands. In these interviews, discrimination was presented as a more-or-less common and inevitable fact of life and one of those things you have to learn to cope with. The next excerpt is another clear example of this line of reasoning.

Excerpt 10

1. *Henk*: I don't know what causes it. Well, I guess it's in people's nature. It, it's as
2. old as man himself.
3. *Interviewer*: It's not typically Dutch?
4. *Henk*: That is, no.
5. *Gerda*: No, definitely no. I think it happens abroad, too.
6. *Henk*: Yes, it certainly does happen abroad.

This excerpt shows that discrimination by the Dutch can be accounted for by defining it as an intrinsic part of human nature and as something that "certainly" happens elsewhere, too. In this way, the perpetrators are made less responsible and less blameworthy. However, although human, the cause of the discriminatory behavior is internal in this explanation. A further discounting of responsibility can be achieved by presenting discrimination as a reasonable and "natural" reaction to the problematic behavior of others, as is done in the next excerpt.

Excerpt 11

1. *Interviewer*: In what area does discrimination happen most?
2. *Theo*: I think mostly, er, er, if they, er, cause a nuisance. If you aren't bothered by
3. them, then I think, well, then people won't say anything, but if you are, well then
4. it's no surprise, is it. We're not complete fools are we. No, it er, er, look. As long as
5. they blend in and, well, you know, act like us then er . . .
6. *Annie*: Well, there wouldn't be that much in the way of discrimination. But if they
7. cause irritations, well, it happens doesn't it.

The hesitations in line 2 indicate the sensitivity of blaming foreigners themselves for the discrimination they face. There is always the possibility that one's views are held to reflect underlying prejudices. Theo seems to orient himself to this undermining idea by presenting 'us' and "people" as being rational and reasonable. Note the footing shift that takes place. In lines 2 and 3, Theo uses the generalized terms "you" and "people," and in line 4 he adopts the first-person plural "we" and "us." The discrimination by "us," the Dutch, is defined as being reactive, a reasonable and self-evident reaction to the unreasonable behavior of ethnic minorities. Discriminating against "them," when they do not adapt and cause nuisance, is obvious and rational. It is "no surprise, is it," it "happens, doesn't it," and "we're not complete fools." Thus, the account draws upon forms of idiomatic expressions (Drew & Holt, 1989) that avoid attributing discrimination to any particular intentions or actions of the Dutch. The effect of all this is that minorities themselves are made responsible for the discrimination they face whereas the Dutch, in principle, would be willing to accept them, albeit on their own conditions.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

Discrimination was a recurrent and important topic in the interviews with the ethnic minority participants. In general, discrimination was talked about in much more diverse and detailed ways than by the Dutch participants. There were statements made about discrimination in society and there were vivid stories about incidents and experiences with everyday discrimination in schools, at work, and in discos and pubs.

However, many of the participants rejected the one-sided role of victim implied by discriminatory practices and claimed an active and responsible position for themselves. They located themselves within a discourse of social opportunities and protestant ethics. They argued that there were real opportunities for upward social mobility in the Netherlands depending on one's own efforts and perseverance. The importance of socioeconomic success was stressed and defined as a personal responsibility. Their use of a discourse of opportunities, potential success, and personal responsibilities raises the question of how to account for discrimination. Claiming an active and constructive role for oneself and one's group raises the problem of how to avoid an interpretation in which one is only determined by, a victim of, the majority group. We identified two ways of accounting for ethnic discrimination from the responses: (a) questioning the omnipresence and seriousness of discrimination and (b) explaining why discrimination exists.

The omnipresence and seriousness of discrimination. In the interviews, there were different accounts that questioned the omnipresence

and seriousness of discrimination. One strategy is to make the claim of discrimination dependent on the feelings and concerns of the ethnic minorities themselves. Similar to some of the Dutch participants, it was argued that people from ethnic minority groups are often too sensitive to racism and discrimination. Minorities would be too quick to use discrimination as an excuse for not doing well.

Excerpt 12

1. *Els* (Hindustani-Surinamese woman): In my opinion, Hindustanis tend to look for
2. a scapegoat straight off, for someone to blame.
3. *Interviewer*: And who would that be?
4. *Els*: Well, the Dutch, of course.
5. *Interviewer*: Is that right?
6. *Els*: I think so. They do something wrong and, er, pass the buck to the Dutch
7. straightaway. I think there's no point. If somebody can't find a job, well then of
8. course they are never to blame, no, it's the Dutch because they discriminate. Well,
9. er, look, sorry, you should try hard yourself first and er, learn to be critical of
10. yourself.

Excerpt 13

1. *Interviewer*: Yeah, but surely there are a lot more unemployed foreigners than unemployed
2. Dutch people.
3. *Kadir* (Turkish man): Yes, that's right, but er, their own fault.
4. *Interviewer*: Do you think?
5. *Kadir*: Yeah, sure thing. Look, I've never been to school here in the Netherlands,
6. but if I really want a job, I get job offers like everywhere. It's got nothing to do
7. with discrimination, those people have like themselves to blame, sure thing. If a
8. person wants like something, then he will get ahead.

In both excerpts, the speakers draw upon two contrasting accounts for (the lack of) social success of ethnic minorities. The one is discrimination, with its victim position, and the other is one's own efforts and perseverance. In doing so, the former account is rejected in favor of the latter. Discrimination would be an easy excuse for lack of personal effort and self-reflection. Hence, the drawing of this distinction allows one to downplay the importance of discrimination and to cast ethnic minorities as blameworthy. In contrast, these participants differentiate themselves from the role of victim and define minorities as being in charge of and responsible for their own lives.

In both extracts, a distinction between the group and the individual is also made. Billig (1987) has shown that this kind of distinction is crucial for understanding prejudice and race talk. In the present context, the claim that ethnic minorities are discriminated against is countered by stressing individual possibilities and responsibilities.

This distinction is also useful to challenge the omnipresence and seriousness of discrimination. For example, one can acknowledge the existence of discrimination in society but at the same time argue that one has hardly ever experienced any discrimination personally. The next excerpt is from the interview with a Moluccan participant, Joey.

Excerpt 14

1. *Interviewer*: All right, can you tell me about discrimination?
2. *Joey*: I've never had real problems with that.
3. *Interviewer*: It hasn't happened a lot, then?
4. *Joey*: No, not to me.
5. *Interviewer*: It has to others?
6. *Joey*: No, er, not to them either as far as I know. To my friends that is, er,
not
7. really, no not at all.
8. *Interviewer*: Does that mean discrimination doesn't exist?
9. *Joey*: Of course it does, er, there's plenty of it about, but, er, it's never
happened
10. to me.

Prior to the excerpt, Joey was explaining that he considered himself quite successful and that he saw further possibilities for upward social mobility. Subsequently, the interviewer invited him to talk about discrimination (line 1). In response, Joey claims explicitly (line 2) that neither he nor his friends (lines 6 to 7) have any serious or "real" personal experiences or problems with discrimination. In the last two lines, however, he contrasts this with the discrimination that obviously exists.

There are several other examples in the interviews where personal discrimination is denied or downplayed but group discrimination is acknowledged. Most of the stories told by these participants were about discrimination in society or about what others had told them. This difference between perceiving more discrimination directed at minority groups in general than at oneself personally as a member of a minority group is a common finding in social psychology for which various cognitive and affective explanations have been put forward (see Taylor, Wright, & Porter, 1993). However, discursively, the denial of personal discrimination upholds the idea that discrimination is not ubiquitous, and therefore, that opportunities and future rewards exist. Structural and pervasive discrimination in society is difficult to reconcile with a discourse that emphasizes opportunities and individual effort.

The distinction between the individual and group level can also function to deal with the potential accusation of distancing oneself from the experiences and position of one's ethnic minority group. Accusations of disloyalty and betrayal, using terms such as "acting White," "selling out," and "bounty" are also found in the Netherlands, and dealing with them may require quite a bit of discursive work (Verkuyten & De Wolf, 2002). Here, Joey claims that he himself has never experienced discrimination but that there is "of course plenty" of discrimination. This type of contrast is a very effective device in orientating to the possibility of being heard as overly critical of and distancing oneself from one's own group members (Dickerson, 2000).

Explaining discrimination. The structural nature of discrimination with its victimizing and limiting effects on people's lives can also be challenged by means of particular explanations for the existence of discrimination. For example, presenting discrimination as a common and general human phenomenon not only explains its existence but also implies that it is not typical of the Dutch to be perpetrators, nor is it typical of ethnic minorities to be victims.

Excerpt 15

1. *Interviewer:* So you get discriminated against in Turkey, too?
2. *Ahmed:* Sure I do, everywhere.
3. *Interviewer:* Everywhere?
4. *Ahmed:* Yeah, everybody discriminates, don't they, it, er, happens everywhere.
5. Not just between Dutch people and foreigners, but, er, also among foreigners
6. themselves.

Excerpt 16

1. *Fatma:* But we discriminate, too, Turkish people against Dutch people.
2. *Nezahat:* Yeah, discrimination . . .
3. *Fatma:* Too, against the Dutch.
4. *Nezahat:* And, er, against Surinamese and Moroccans.
5. *Fatma:* We even discriminate among ourselves, among Turkish people.

In these two excerpts, discrimination is constructed as a general human phenomenon in much the same way as it was by some of the Dutch participants. In Extract 15, the term "don't they" (in Dutch *toch*) invites agreement and helps to define the claim as a self-evident one. Furthermore, the claim is made factual by using modalizing terms such as "everyone" and "everywhere" (Excerpt 15), referring to personal experiences (Excerpt 15, line 2) and taking an insider's perspective ("we" in Excerpt 16, line 1). In addition, the use of the terms "too" in lines 1 and 3, and "even" in line 5 in Excerpt 16, and of "not just" in line 5 in Ex-

cerpt 15 indicates an orientation to the “normal” or “scripted” pattern (Edwards, 1997) of the Dutch being dominant and discriminating and minority groups being subordinate and discriminated against. The terms indicate that minority groups are not really expected to display discrimination. Hence, the claim that they are also perpetrators and the Dutch also victims needs to attend to this familiar, standard scheme for interpreting discrimination (see also Excerpts 7, 8, 9).

Thus, similar to some of the Dutch participants, discrimination was constructed as a more-or-less inevitable fact of life, just one of those things you have to cope with. However, in the interviews with these minority group participants it functioned not in the context of a potential negative group image but rather in relation to claims about possibilities for upward social mobility and personal responsibilities.

In addition, discrimination was presented in some of the interviews not only as the act of a perpetrator toward a helpless victim, but also as an interaction. The victim would bear part of the responsibility. For example, it was argued that founding and attending Islamic schools, not learning Dutch, living separately, overcommunicating one’s ethnicity, and generally failing to integrate into Dutch society stresses differences, thus fueling discrimination. This would be part of the reason why some people were discriminated against. The next excerpt is taken from an interview with two Turkish males talking about the problems of Turkish youth.

Excerpt 17

1. *Nafar*: Well, I expect young people to better themselves. Get more education and
2. work and that type of, er, thing and hobbies. And, er, if you hang around in pubs
3. all day, day and night, what kind of a future do you have really. Me, I’ve got a
4. cousin who’s, er, he’s been in the Netherlands for almost 22 years and he’s had a
5. job for only two years, welfare the rest of the time. He goes to pubs twice or three
6. times a day, but towards the end of the month he’s off to the bank like a shot to get
7. his cash.
8. *Celsuk*: That’s how you get discrimination.
9. *Nafar*: Yeah, that’s how you get discrimination, discrimination gets worse this
10. way.
11. *Celsuk*: Too right.

In this excerpt, the participants argue that minorities themselves are responsible for the (increasing) discrimination that exists. Nafar claims that there are possibilities for young people to better themselves, but that this is their own responsibility. By using the term “you”

(line 2), he continues to make a generalized claim, and subsequently he provides a concrete example with details about age, length of residence, and place. The factuality of this description is further enhanced because it concerns the behavior of a family member. This helps to achieve neutrality and works against a skeptical reading of the description (Potter, 1996). The effect of this for the explanation of discrimination and the responsibilities of ethnic minorities can be seen in Celsuk's conclusion.

DISCUSSION

Discrimination against ethnic minorities is a pervasive and highly problematic phenomenon and a sensitive social issue. In social psychology, discrimination is predominantly examined in terms of intergroup differentiation and perceptions. These studies have provided insights into underlying cognitive and emotional processes but they do not examine how discrimination is discursively defined and explained. Discrimination is part of daily life, and our understanding of it is argued about in conversations in which particular descriptions and interpretations are justified or criticized. This article has examined some of the ways in which ethnic minority and majority group members account for ethnic discrimination in society.

In examining racism and discrimination, mainstream social psychological research has a tendency to use a rather simple dualist majority-minority or dominant-subordinate model. Such a model is typically also used in discourse analytical work that examines racist discourse and discursive strategies among majority group members and against the background of a society in which ethnic minorities are excluded and discriminated against by the majority group (e.g., Augoustinos et al., 2002; Rapley, 2001; Van Dijk, 1992; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). However, using this model holds the danger of confounding a critical position with analytical explanation that perpetuates race and ethnic dualism (Cameron, 1998). For one thing, this dualism tends to ignore the diversity within majority and minority groups and to neglect the possibility that members of both groups explain discrimination in similar ways.

The present analysis has tried to show that ethnic Dutch and ethnic minority members can give similar accounts and use similar discursive strategies when describing and explaining the existence of discrimination. The main conclusion is that these discursive strategies can be understood in relation to the way speakers position themselves within particular discourses, rather than by a single overarching majority-minority factor. The use and effects of these strategies are related to the subject positions made available by the participants and

the context in which they appear. Hence, similar discursive strategies function in different ways in different contexts.

For example, some ethnic Dutch participants argued that people from ethnic minorities are often too sensitive to racism and discrimination. This well-known claim (e.g., Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) may be understood in the context of a potential negative group image; the claim makes the Dutch less responsible and blameworthy. However, some of the ethnic minority members also argued that minorities are oversensitive and too apt to use discrimination as an excuse for not doing well. This argument was related to ideas of personal agency and was deployed in a discourse about own responsibilities and existing possibilities for upward social mobility. The speakers in question claimed an active and constructive role and presented themselves as agents of their own responsibilities. Hence, discursive strategies that are used to challenge the existence, omnipresence, and seriousness of discrimination and to problematize its causes can function in different ways in different contexts. They can function to sustain and legitimate the position and interests of the dominant group, but they can also function to uphold the idea of possibilities for social improvement and change.

The implication of this analysis is that studies of discrimination should pay close attention to the various ways in which accounts of discrimination are related to available discourses within the group of ethnic majority as well as minority group members. Members of both groups are not locked inside their group or incapable of shifting positions but rather competent discursive agents. With a dominant-subordinate dichotomy, it is sometimes difficult to make sense of discourses in which people are in the process of arguing about discrimination, exclusion, and self-definitions, and in doing so use various discursive strategies. This dichotomy tends to turn identities and group relations into relatively fixed and homogeneous entities rather than examining how group relations and identities are being produced and acted out. There is a range of discourses and practices that place individuals and groups in particular subject positions. Competing constructions and challenges are always possible.

Examining the actual use of discursive practices also offers scope for acknowledging personal agency. Studies of discrimination carry the danger of portraying majority group individuals as more or less passive recipients of socially oppressive practices and ideas and minority members as rather helpless victims (Oyserman & Swim, 2001; Shelton, 2000). However, majority group members can position themselves within various discourses, including humanitarian and Christian ones, and ethnic minority group members are able to reject the victim position and to claim an active, constructive, and responsible role for themselves.

However, it goes without saying that the need for careful studies of processes of positioning within particular discourses does not undermine analyses of structural and institutional discrimination in society. Discrimination is evident in many spheres of society, and the domination-subordination model is very useful for examining accounts and interpretations that legitimize existing patterns of ethnic dominance.

Furthermore, this model is also a participant's resource, one that was used in the interviews. It featured in the questions asked about discrimination against "foreigners" and in the interviewees' answers, such as when arguing that ethnic minorities discriminate *too*. Societal definitions of majority-minority relations (discriminating and discriminated at) are known and oriented to in accounting for discrimination. Hence, certain definitions are more likely to be accepted than others, and certain constructions (minorities as discriminating and majorities as discriminated against) need more discursive work than others. The majority-minority model formed an important backdrop against which the particular accounts were provided. For example, in accounting for discrimination, the ethnic minority participants—but not the Dutch—distanced themselves from the victim position. Thus, the participants attended to this model in the various subject positions adopted.

By way of conclusion, two issues will be considered: the generalizability of the results and the approach taken. There are several reasons for being careful about generalizing the present results too widely. One is that the study was not intended as a complete analysis. The aim was to identify and highlight some of the differences and similarities in the ways that discrimination is accounted for by different groups of participants. Discrimination is a complex and socially sensitive phenomenon and other constructions and accounts are always possible, for example, by bringing in the notion of positive discrimination. The study was also conducted using a limited number of participants. However, it should be noted that it was part of a number of other studies of different ethnic groups in the Netherlands. The findings presented here are quite similar to tendencies found in these other studies (see Verkuyten, 1997, 2001) but go beyond them by focusing explicitly on discrimination and by examining within-ethnic group differences. In addition, there are comparable results in studies carried out in other European countries (see also Waters, 1994). Triandafyllidou (2000), for example, identified two normative discourses in political talk on immigration in Greece, Italy, and Spain. On one hand, a humanitarian and egalitarian discourse was found in which the contribution of immigrants to society is stressed and discrimination is condemned. Alongside this, however, was a nationalist discourse that legitimized discrimination and unequal treatment of ethnic minorities.

There is also the question of the approach taken and the limits of a discursive approach to understanding discrimination. Questions of

discrimination are discussed in many different situations and in relation to many different groups. However, this flexibility and variability does not mean that there are no recurrent, common strategies and discursive resources. For example, and as shown, explanations in terms of knowing versus thinking, appearance versus reality, and general human versus group specific are used in different situations, for different purposes, and by majority and minority group members. Discursive approaches identify these strategies and resources, and examine their effects. By doing so, the limits of a conceptualization of discrimination in terms of perception and cognition are shown. This is not to say, however, that these approaches or the present research demonstrate that differences in psychological tendencies and feelings do not exist or are of secondary importance.

Discursive studies do not tell us much about why particular identity positions are adopted in specific situations as well as habitually across situations. That is to say, these studies do not explain why an individual adopts a particular subject position out of a range of options or why there are individual differences in the positions adopted. Within ethnic groups, individuals may experience and respond differently to the forms of discrimination they encounter. Several theorists sympathetic to discourse analyses have pointed out that an emphasis on discourse and discursive strategies runs the danger of overlooking the psychological or subjective dimension (e.g., Burr, 2002). For example, some writers have incorporated psychoanalytic ideas in order to complement discourse analysis (e.g., Billig, 1997; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Parker, 1997) and others emphasize personal experiences and life histories (e.g., Hollway, 1989; Stapleton & Wilson, 2003). These efforts are an important contribution to an even more adequate and elaborate understanding of people's lives.

In conclusion, this study has tried to contribute to the existing social psychological work on ethnic discrimination by focusing on the descriptions and interpretations of discrimination itself rather than on cognitive and affective processes. Furthermore, the study has tried to go beyond the majority-minority dualist model that is typically used in this work as well as in discourse analytical work on discrimination and racism. The intention was to investigate how people account for discrimination in society. Including both majority and minority group members in the study allowed for the examination of discursive strategies as used within both groups. It was shown that the meaning of these discursive strategies was related to the ways that participants positioned themselves within particular discourses within both groups. In examining the diverse and active ways in which people describe and explain discrimination, this study has tried to make a contribution to our understanding of one of the more problematic social phenomena and the approaches used to examine it.

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